The Sword That Gives Life

In Japanese martial arts there is a saying: the sword is the soul of the samurai. In early times, the bow and arrow were the primary weapons of Japan’s samurai warriors. It was not until the late 14th century that the sword replaced the bow and arrow as the samurai’s primary weapon. Eventually, the wearing of swords was restricted to members of the samurai class. In fact, it became a requirement of their daily dress. For the samurai, the sword became both the symbol of authority and the instrument of life and death.

The samurai wore two swords which were placed with the cutting edge facing upward in their belt. The primary sword was a 38-42 inch, curved, single-edged, long sword called a katana or long sword. In addition to the long sword, the samurai would also wear a short sword (approximately 23-26 inches) called a wakizashi or companion sword. The two swords together were referred to as a daishō meaning big and small.

When mounted on horseback, a samurai would use a slightly longer version of the katana called a tachi. Instead of being worn blade up in the belt, the scabbard of the tachi had a fitting so that it could be slung from the belt with its cutting edge facing downward.

Due to its length, the katana typically would not be worn indoors, but the wakizachi was short enough to be used both indoors and outdoors and would be worn all of the time. It was possible to fight with the katana in one hand and the wakizachi in the other. However, the most common practice in battle was to use the katana in a two-handed fashion as the primary weapon and to use the wakizachi as a backup.

When not being worn, the two swords were placed on a rack; the cutting edges would be turned upward. Placing the handle on the right side was considered an aggressive position (a killing sword), since it allowed the sword to be grabbed, in a ready to use position, by a right-handed person. The more harmonious position was to place the sword with the handle on the left side (a life-giving sword).

The traditional method of making Japanese swords is a laborious process involving many steps by skilled craftsmen. A well made sword would not only be sharp, flexible, and strong, it would also have a balance and responsiveness, that in the hands of an expert swordsman, would make the sword appear to have a personality of its own. For this reason, the traditional swordsman would fast and pray prior to making the sword; in the hope that none of the swordsman's own character flaws would transfer into the sword.

This concept is depicted in the story of the sword makers Okazaki Masamune, widely recognized as Japan's greatest swordsman, and Sengo Muramasa, who was the leading swordsman of the next generation.

The swords of Okazaki Masamune have a reputation for superior beauty and quality. The few Masamune swords that still exist all have the legal status either as Japan's national treasures or part of the imperial regalia.

On the other hand, legends have been handed down over the years, saying that Muramasa blades will cry out for blood in the night, or that once unsheathed a Muramasa will always “taste blood” before it is put away. These legends have their basis in some unfortunate incidents that befell the Tokugawa family which was, at that time, ruling Japan. Two heads of the Tokugawa family were killed and one wounded himself twice with blades made by Muramasa. For that reason, the mere possession of Muramasa blades in certain circumstances was considered treasonous.

One legend around these two swords smiths is used to explain the distinction between satsujinken (i.e. the killing sword) and katsujinken (i.e. the life-giving sword). In this legend, Muramasa’s blades are described as bloodthirsty or evil while Masamune's are considered the mark of an internally peaceful and calm warrior. According to the story, a contest was held to see who had made the better weapon. In order to see whose blades would cut most effortlessly, a Muramasa blade and a Masamune blade were each suspended into a river. The idea was that if the blade could cut through an object which was only being propelled by a gentle current of water, then it must have great cutting ability.

Muramasa's sword cut everything that passed its way; fish, leaves floating down the river. The blade even seemed to attract items; drawing them into its path before splitting them. This was taken to be an example of the killing sword.

In contrast, Masamune’s sword cut nothing at all. As the leaves floated down stream and the fish swam about, they would all gently alter course to flow around the Masamune sword without ever touching the blade. This was taken to be an example of the life-giving sword.
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The notion that the sword would be an instrument of killing is apparent. It is easy to understand the notion of the killing sword.

The more interesting question is how a sword could be considered as an instrument of life. What is the basis of the concept of a life-giving sword? One obvious answer is self preservation and the ability to use the sword for self defense or the protection of others. Another reason is that the presence of the weapon and the office it represented would present a deterrence which would, in most cases, eliminate the need for its use. In our American culture, this would be it would be similar to the way in which the 1873 Colt .45 caliber six-shooter came to be called the peacemaker or to the way in which law enforcement officials are referred to as peace officers.

Still another consideration is the impact of sword training on the warrior. Long hours of intense training, over many years, have a transformational effect on the swordsman. At the higher levels of swordsmanship even an innocuous object like a pencil or a paper fan can be used as a sword. A master swordsman can even use his opponent’s sword as if it were his own. At this level of skill, the swordsman has internalized the sword and it is expressed in the everyday actions of the swordsman.

Through martial arts training, the practitioner becomes the weapon. This is illustrated in the story of Daruma (also known as Bodhidharma), the 1st century head of China’s Shaolin monastery and legendary originator of Kung Fu. According to martial arts tradition, when civil war and lawlessness were ravaging China during the 1st century Daruma said:

*War and killing is wrong, but it is also wrong to be unprepared to defend oneself against attack. Although we have no knives, we will make every finger a dagger. Although our maces have been confiscated, we will make every fist into a mace. Although we are without spears; we will turn every arm into a spear and every open hand a sword.*

So when we look at the martial artist, rather than the sword, as being the weapon, we can then ask: What kind of weapon should the martial artist be? At Wheatbelt Aikido, our goal is life-giving.

In ancient Japan, this as attitude was captured in the seven virtues of a warrior. These seven virtues exemplify the everyday manifestations of the life-giving sword. According to this notion an ideal warrior (or contemporary martial artist) is:

- **Righteous** (義 gi) - A martial artist deals openly and honestly with others and adheres to the ideals of justice. Moral decisions have clarity and commitment.
- **Courageous** (勇 yū) - A martial artist never fears to act, but lives life fully and wonderfully. Respect, alertness, and caution replace fear.
- **Compassionate** (仁 jin) - A martial artist takes every opportunity to aid others, and creates opportunities when they do not arise. As an empowered individual, a martial artist has a responsibility to use his abilities to help others.
- **Respectful** (礼 rei) - A martial artist has no reason to be mean, arrogant, or show off. Courtesy distinguishes a martial artist as an enlightened person, and reveals his true strength.
- **Honest** (誠 makoto or 忠 shin) – This is captured by the expression: A warrior has no second word. The martial artist speaks truth and stands by his words, accepting responsibility for them, no matter the consequences.
- **Honorable** (名譽 metyou) - When a martial artist has said that he shall perform an action, it is as good as done. He need not make promises; speaking and doing are as if the same.
- **Loyal** (忠義 chūgi) - A martial artist stands faithful to the people under his care, to his responsibilities, and to his higher authorities. The loyalty is tempered by ethics and integrity.

In our modern society we transfer these notions of warrior virtues from being attributes of the warrior class to being attributes of the contemporary martial artist.

Even though martial arts are no longer of key importance to the military, it is interesting to note how the similarities between these ancient virtues and the modern The 7 Army Core Values adopted by the US Army in the late 1990s:

Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage